

8 EDITORIAL



Sharing, and not caring

The SP-BSP tie-up poses a challenge to the BJP, but does little for pre-poll opposition unity

Sometimes, it is impossible to make new friends without making new enemies. In reaching an early agreement on seat-sharing in Uttar Pradesh for this year's Lok Sabha election, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party have thrown a serious challenge to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in a State that could well determine which political formation forms the next Central government. In the process, however, they may have alienated the Congress, which, given its pan-Indian footprint, can be the only national-level force in an emerging anti-BJP coalition. The two biggest parties in U.P.'s opposition space have equally carved out 76 of the 80 seats between themselves, leaving four to the Congress and the Rashtriya Lok Dal, which has a support base in the western region of the State. Whether the seat sharing is final or just a bargaining tactic is difficult to say. But for now, the Congress has been pushed into a forlorn corner in India's most populous State. The party may have to strike out on its own in sheer desperation at being denied a reasonable number of seats. It is doubtful, or at least by no means certain, whether it will be content with contesting in only a few seats to prevent a split in the anti-BJP vote in the others. It will be difficult for a party in revival mode in other parts of the Hindi heartland to give up U.P. without putting up a serious fight. As for the SP and BSP, it will be odd for them to be locked in a fight with the Congress in the State, while pushing for a Congress-led alternative at the national level.

The Congress does enjoy additional support in a Lok Sabha election; it demonstrated this in 2009, winning a surprise 21 seats in U.P. However, the SP and the BSP have probably calculated they are in a good space following the BJP's poor showing in three Lok Sabha by-polls, one of them in Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's political backyard, Gorakhpur. They may well also be banking on the history of strategic voting in the State, which leaves little room for a third player. For all the talk of beating back the challenge of the BJP, regional parties know it is easier to do business with a weakened Congress than with a resurgent one. If the Congress is kept out of the alliance, then any alternative to the BJP will have to emerge from a post-poll coalition of disparate parties. This will hand a campaign point for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is already projecting the choice in 2019 as that between a strong government and a motley post-poll coalition united by no more than a shared aversion for the BJP. The strategy of the SP and the BSP and some other regional players to defeat the BJP without making the Congress win is high-risk, and tactically difficult to implement on the ground.

Change in Congo

A contentious election may lead to the country's first transfer of power via the ballot

After last month's general election, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is anxiously awaiting the first ever transfer of power via the ballot since gaining independence in 1960. President Joseph Kabila, who had already deferred the polls by two years, postponed them again by a week days before it was scheduled in December. He cited the Ebola outbreak in some provinces and the destruction of electronic voting machines in a fire in the capital Kinshasa as reasons for the latest delay. But Mr. Kabila's critics dismissed these excuses as coming from a President in denial of his impending defeat after 17 years in power. Their suspicions appeared to be justified, as prominent opposition leaders were barred from the contest by partisan courts and the election commission. Meanwhile, the UN has voiced concerns over the quality of voting machines and the deployment of the state machinery to obstruct opposition campaigns, adding to the sense of uncertainty. Soon after polling closed on December 30, rival camps began to pronounce victory for their own sides. When the election commission last week announced Felix Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress as the winner, it predictably created a controversy. Mr. Kabila's candidate, former Interior Minister Emmanuel Shadary, was expected to romp home. In the event, Mr. Shadary, who faces accusations of human rights abuses, was ranked third. The outcome triggered intense speculation that Mr. Kabila had cut a deal to back Mr. Tshisekedi, son of a deceased opposition leader. The candidate who came in second, Martin Fayulu, a political outsider, has challenged the results.

DR Congo's Catholic church, which runs an independent poll observation mission, has questioned the official result and has even threatened to legally challenge it. It is but natural that DR Congo's vibrant civil society groups should expect the judiciary to assert its independence, as did the court in Kenya following that country's disputed 2017 elections. There are real fears that without genuine attempts to uphold the rule of law, the central African nation could slip into protracted political uncertainty and social unrest. The U.S. has cautioned Mr. Kabila against attempting to doctor the popular mandate. But with an eye on the country's lucrative mineral wealth, which is needed to power electric cars and the robotics revolution, there are limits to the pressure Western nations will want to exert on Kinshasa in the months ahead. The role of Mr. Kabila, who is just 47 years old, in the coming days will be important to watch. He has emphasised that by stepping down, he is merely respecting the constitutional mandate. The intent behind that assertion will be tested in the ensuing months.

A way out of the morass

The U.S.'s plan to pull out of Afghanistan is an appropriate time to re-examine the idea of enabling its neutrality



C.R. GHAREKHAN & HAMID ANSARI

In an article published in *The Hindu* (Editorial page, "Another Approach to Afghanistan", December 24, 2003), we had suggested that the only way out of the morass in Afghanistan would be to re-place Afghanistan in its traditional mode of neutrality. For that, two things were essential. The Afghans themselves must declare unequivocally that they would follow strict neutrality in their relations with external powers, and the outside powers must commit themselves to respect Afghanistan's neutrality. In other words, external powers must subscribe to a multilateral declaration not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan together with an obligation on Afghanistan not to seek outside intervention in its internal situation.

We further put forward the idea that the agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, concluded in 1962, could provide a model for the neutralisation of Afghanistan. The present might be an appropriate time to revisit that proposal.

U.S. President Donald Trump has announced his decision to reduce American troop strength in Afghanistan, 14,000 at present, by half. Though Mr. Trump has not laid down a deadline for this reduction, it is safe to assume that he will make this happen well in time before the next U.S. presidential election in 2020.

This development has ener-

gised the principal stakeholders in Afghanistan to make calculated efforts to place themselves in as favourable a position as possible in an Afghanistan post-American withdrawal. India should also be thinking of what steps it should take to protect its interests in that situation.

Engage with the Taliban

One thing that should already have been done and must be done is to engage in dialogue with the Taliban. There is no doubt that the Taliban will be a major player in the politics of Afghanistan in the coming months and years. They already control more than 50% of the country and are getting stronger and bolder by the day. They are also engaged in direct talks with China, Russia, the Central Asian states and others. The Americans, represented by former diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, have begun sustained dialogue with the Taliban. The Taliban have refused to talk to the Kabul government so far, but as and when the Americans pull out, as they are justified in doing for reasons of their own national interest, they might agree to engage with the Ashraf Ghani government. In any future scenario, the Taliban are guaranteed to play an important, perhaps even a decisive role in the governing structures of the country.

New Delhi has so far refrained from establishing formal contacts with the Taliban out of sensitivity for the Kabul government not wanting to talk directly to the Taliban as long as the Taliban refuse to acknowledge its legitimacy. However, India must look after its own interests. Will a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul necessarily pose a serious security threat to us? While we are in no



GETTY IMAGES

position to prevent such an eventuality, we would have alienated the Taliban by refusing to talk to them during the present phase. Even Iran, a Shia regime, has established official dialogue with the Taliban, a staunchly Sunni movement. It would not be difficult for our agencies to establish contacts that would facilitate initiating an official dialogue with Taliban; if needed, Iran could help in this even if it might displease the Americans. After all, the Americans have not always been sensitive to our concerns, in Afghanistan or elsewhere and Mr. Trump has publicly shown unawareness of our substantial development assistance to it.

A regional compact

The international community ought to, at the same time, think of how to establish a mechanism which might offer a reasonable opportunity to the Afghan people to live in peace, free from external interference. And perhaps the only way in which this could be done is to promote a regional compact among all the neighbouring countries as well as relevant external powers, and with the endorsement of the UN Security Council, to commit themselves not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal af-

Basic income works and works well

India has the technological capacity, the financial resources, and the need for a simple, transparent basic income scheme



GUY STANDING

In 2010-2013, I was principal designer of three basic income pilots in West Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, in which over 6,000 men, women and children were provided with modest basic incomes, paid in cash, monthly, without conditions. The money was not much, coming to about a third of subsistence. But it was paid individually, with men and women receiving equal amounts and with children receiving half as much, paid to the mother or surrogate mother. The pilots involved the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and financial assistance from UNICEF and the UNDP.

The outcomes exceeded expectations, partly because everybody in the community, and not just select people, received their own individual transfer. Nutrition improved, sanitation improved, health and health care improved, school attendance and performance improved, women's status and well-being improved, the position of the disabled and vulnerable groups improved by more than others. And the amount and quality of work improved.

Critics said it would be a waste of money, but they were proved

wrong. Above all, the basic incomes improved the community spirit and were emancipatory. Those who do not trust people wish to retain paternalistic policies despite decades of evidence that they are woefully inefficient, ineffective, inequitable and open to ridiculously extensive corruption. The tendency of elites to want to have common people grateful to their discretionary benevolence has blocked sensible economic reform.

As commentators know, in the 2017 Economic Report tabled by the government there is a chapter on how a basic income could be rolled out across India, and is affordable. Its main author, former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, and others such as Professor Pranab Bardhan have proposed ways of paying for it — primarily by rolling back existing wasteful, distortionary, and mostly regressive subsidies. This should not be an issue to divide the left and right in politics, and it would be wonderful if the main political parties and personalities could come together on it. That is too much to hope. But in this wonderful country, now is a moment of transformative potential.

A ripe idea

The international debate on basic income has advanced considerably in the past five years. Experiments have been launched in countries of different levels of per capita income, which include Ca-



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

nada, Finland, Kenya, Namibia, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.S., with plans being drawn up in England, Scotland, South Korea and elsewhere. India could take the lead. It has the technological capacity, the financial resources and, above all, the need for a simple, transparent scheme to liberate the energies of the masses now mired in economic insecurity, deprivation and degradation.

However, as I wrote after the pilots in Madhya Pradesh were completed, planning the phased implementation of basic income will be a serious but manageable challenge. It will require goodwill, integrity, knowledge and humility about what will be inevitable mistakes. As we found, if properly planned, it is possible to introduce a comprehensive scheme even in rural or urban low-income communities, without too much cost. But it is essential to obtain local cooperation and awareness at the outset, and the backing of key local institutions. It is strongly recommended that if the government is to go ahead, it should phase in the scheme gradually, rolling it out from low-income to

higher-income communities, after local officials have been trained and prepared.

It is also recommended that the authorities should not select particular types of individuals and give it only to them. It is tempting to say it should go only to women, low-income farmers, or vulnerable social groups. That would be wrong. It would involve expensive and corruptible procedures, and risk evoking resentment in those arbitrarily excluded, who would probably be equally in need, perhaps more so. The same applies to means-testing targeting. That would be a terrible mistake, for the many reasons reiterated in a recent book on basic income.

What administrators often do not appreciate enough is that money is fungible. If money is given only to women, men will demand a share; some women will give in, some will resist; it will be divisive. We found in the pilots that if men and women all have an equal individual amount, it promotes better and more equal gender relations. Moreover, giving to all in the community fosters solidarity within households and the wider community, apart from enabling multiplier effects in the local economy.

Farm loan waivers

The contrast is bound to be made with the Congress's promise of farm loan waivers. No doubt this policy would lessen the burden on a hard-pressed social group, and lessen rural poverty, but it is a po-

which made Hamid Karzai the interim chief of Afghan government, contains a request to the United Nations and the international community to 'guarantee' non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, a request not acted upon so far.

Some concerns

A regional pact on non-interference and non-intervention ought to be welcomed by all the regional states. Russia has reason to worry about a lack of stability in Afghanistan because of its concerns regarding a spread of radicalism as well as the drug menace. China has even stronger concerns, given the situation in its western-most region. The U.S. might have apprehensions about China entrenching itself in strategically important Afghanistan, but there is little it can do about it; a regional agreement on non-interference might give the U.S. at least some comfort.

It is early days to conclude whether the situation in Afghanistan has entered its end game. In any case, it would be prudent to assume that the U.S. will definitely leave Afghanistan in the next two years, likely to be followed by other western countries. No other country will offer to put boots on the ground, nor should they; certainly not India. The only alternative is to think of some arrangement along the lines we have suggested. May be, there are other ideas; we would welcome them.

*Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, a former Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, was also a Special Envoy for West Asia as a UN Under Secretary General. Hamid Ansari was the Vice-President of India (2007-17), a former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan and a Permanent Representative to the UN*

pulist measure. It will be popular, but will not alter structures and is bad economics. Suppose the principle were generalised. If one type of loan could be declared non-repayable, why not others? Unless one can show that a debt is odious or illegal per se, it would be a dangerous precedent to declare that one type of debt and not others need not be repaid.

In the long term, financial institutions would be less likely to extend loans to small-scale farmers. Is that the aim? If the loans were made on fair rules, it would be better to enable the debtors to pay them back less onerously. That is why a basic income would be a more equitable and economically rational way of addressing what is undoubtedly an unfolding rural tragedy.

The beauty of moving towards a modest basic income would be that all groups would gain. That would not preclude special additional support for those with special needs, nor be any threat to a progressive welfare state in the longterm. It would merely be an anchor of a 21st century income distribution system. Will the politicians show the will to implement it? We need to see.

*Guy Standing is Professorial Research Associate, SOAS University of London, and is co-founder and honorary co-president of BIEN, the Basic Income Earth Network. His most recent book is 'Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen'*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Opposition moves

Excluding the Congress from the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party combine's alliance in Uttar Pradesh has been the subject of lively media debate soon after the announcement by the respective party leaders, Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati. The consensus in these debates has revolved around a landslide win awaiting the SP-BSP alliance. Media discourse, however, seems to have overlooked one important determinant of the poll outcome, namely, the Congress's role as a vote divider. Although the Congress hardly created a ripple in the State in the 2014 Lok Sabha as well the 2017 Assembly elections, 2019 is unlikely to turn out to be another dismal event for the party. Elections in Madhya

Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh seem to have heralded the resurgence of the national party. The formation of an alliance-led government in Karnataka has boosted the morale of its cadres. Party president Rahul Gandhi has also been on a propaganda juggernaut. In U.P., the party is sure to have a respectable share of votes in most constituencies particularly those with pockets of minorities. The division of votes will definitely hurt the gathbandhan to the advantage of the BJP.

K.R. KRISHNA IYER, Palakkad, Kerala

■ The Prime Minister's line at the BJP's national council meet criticising the alliance politics of the Opposition says much about the political realities. The newfound friendship between arch

rivals, the SP and the BSP, in Uttar Pradesh has left the Congress cold. The alliance in West Bengal is in the doldrums. An enthused TRS chief and Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao is leaving no stone unturned to form a federal front against both the BJP and the Congress. One does not know what the situation will be like in Kerala and in Andhra Pradesh. The big question many want to know is who will head the coalition of Opposition parties and what their agenda for the nation is other than defeating common enemy, Narendra Modi and his party, the BJP. Except DMK chief M.K. Stalin, all other non-Congress Opposition parties are tight-lipped about their prime ministerial candidate. The nation is bound to pay heavy price if there is an unstable and weak

government formed by parties lacking cohesion.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

Be transparent

In a democracy, people have a right to know what is happening in the country. The strange happenings at late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's estate in the Nilgiris must be probed. Blacking out a media report and making the threat of legal action are odd reactions by the State government (Tamil Nadu, "Those behind Kodanad video will be exposed" and "Kodanad case: Oppn. demands probe, Edappadi's resignation", January 13). The way in which it is rushing to gag things leads to suspicion that there is more to the incidents than what meets the eye.

R.M. MANOHARAN, Chennai

Rat hole traps

It is obvious that there is a lack of major employment opportunities in the northeast States ('Ground Zero' page, "Meghalaya's rat hole traps", January 12). How else can one explain why young men are forced to look at the very risky option of extracting coal from rat hole mines? What the entire northeast region is blessed with in abundance is natural beauty. Perhaps ways should be explored to have sustainable and eco-friendly models so that tourism becomes a major revenue earner in the region.

RADHIKA KUMAR, Bengaluru

Fading Urdu?

Urdu has played a major role in the success story of many an Indian film. What is unfortunate now is how film producers are now biased against this otherwise

sweet language which enables succinct dialogues, a flow to parlance and apt proverbs to embellish a film script. A key factor responsible for the diminution of Urdu is official apathy. There needs to be a way to encourage youngsters to look at Urdu again. Back in the 1960s-70s, Yusuf Dehlvi's *Shama* was a very popular Urdu film magazine which published a myriad articles and poetry from sought after litterateurs such as Krishan Chander, Sajjad Zaheer, Ismat Chughtai and Dildar Nasri Rampuri to name a few. In this age of digitalisation, the residue of a trove of Urdu can be recorded for the generations to come (Magazine section, Page 3, "Edited by Manto", January 13).

AZHAR A. KHAN, Rampur, Uttar Pradesh

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.co/opinion/letters/